

*this Administration has undertaken policy and procedural changes to facilitate the collection and distribution of scarce eagle bodies and parts for this purpose.”*

– President Clinton, Executive Memorandum <sup>6</sup>

Federal law and policy has long recognized the religious and ceremonial significance of eagle feathers to Native peoples. The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1962 allows tribal members to continue to include eagle parts in their religious ceremonies by providing special exemptions to American Indians and Alaska Natives.<sup>7</sup> Also, for more than twenty years, the federal government has followed an established system for distributing eagle feathers to Native peoples for religious and ceremonial purposes.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, U.S. Department of Justice policies are guided by the recognition that “[f]rom time immemorial, many Native Americans have viewed eagle feathers and other bird parts as sacred elements of their religious and cultural traditions.”<sup>8</sup>

## Most Schools Allow Native Students to Wear Eagle Feathers

Given the Native American reverence for eagles and the high honor represented by graduation, most schools recognize that commencement ceremonies are an appropriate setting for Native students to wear an eagle feather with dignity. Most schools that have faced this question in the past few decades have understood that permitting Native students to wear eagle feathers is not only good policy, but the right

thing to do. While many schools approve Native students’ requests to wear an eagle feather on a case-by-case basis, some districts have adopted policies allowing all Native graduates to have this distinct honor. These policies range from specifically accommodating Native students, to permitting student organizations that represent certain cultural groups to approve and/or distribute culturally-appropriate honor chords, which include eagle feathers for Native students.

*“It’s my belief it is our responsibility to be respectful of each student’s spiritual and cultural beliefs. Not just to enable [cultural expression] but to respect and honor their heritage. [This Assiniboine/Lakota Sioux graduate] will become an example to other Native American students. Her wearing the eagle feather will say, ‘This is a goal you can reach and be a member of your tribe at the same time.’”*

–Superintendent Joyce Henstrand, Reynolds School District, Fairview, OR <sup>9</sup>

*“I’m so excited to get to embrace my culture and that it gets to be part of my graduation day . . . I’m so thankful that our superintendent allowed us to wear our feathers. It is a big deal to us to be able to do this and wear them proudly.”*

–Allison Turner (Cherokee) <sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Exec. Office of the President, *Native Youth Report*, at 16 (December 2014), [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/20141129nativeyouthreport\\_final.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/20141129nativeyouthreport_final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Dec. of Isidro Gali at ¶ 5-6, *Titman v. Clavis Unified Sch. Dist.*, No. 15CECG01717 (Cal. Super. Ct. 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Schilling, *Principal Tells Graduating Native: Hide Your Eagle Feather Under Your Gown*, Indian Country Today, May 13, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Saltzstein, *Students win right to traditional dress under cap & gown*, Indian Country Today, May 26, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Dec. of Christian Titman at ¶ 5, *Titman v. Clavis Unified Sch. Dist.*, No. 15CECG01717 (Cal. Super. Ct. 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Policy Concerning Distribution of Eagle Feathers for Native American Religious Purposes, 59 Fed. Reg. 22953 (Apr. 29, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Press Release, Dep’t of Justice Office of Pub. Affairs, Justice Dep’t Announces Policy on Tribal Member Use of Eagle Feathers (Oct. 12, 2012), <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-policy-tribal-member-use-eagle-feathers>.

<sup>9</sup> Tanya Lee, *High Schooler First Not Allowed, Then Allowed, to Wear Eagle Feather in Graduation Cap*, Indian Country Today, November 28, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Lenzy Krehbiel-Burton, *Native Verdigris seniors to wear eagle feathers at graduation*, Cherokee Phoenix, May 11, 2015.

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# Wearing Eagle Feathers at Graduation

*Information for Schools*



Source: *Eagle Feathers First Banned, Then Allowed at California Graduation*, Indian Country Today, June 16, 2014.

Every year, Native high school students from across the country seek to express their individual and tribal religious beliefs and celebrate their personal academic achievements by wearing an eagle feather at graduation. Graduation from high school is an especially significant occasion for Native students and families, considering that the American Indian and Alaska Native high school graduation rate is 67 percent, the lowest of any racial or ethnic demographic across all schools.<sup>1</sup> While most public school districts permit Native students to wear eagle feathers during commencement ceremonies, some school districts do not allow it. This guide seeks to educate schools about why it is culturally and religiously important for Native students to be allowed to wear eagle feathers during graduation.

## Religious Significance

*“Both bald and golden eagles (and their feathers) are revered and considered sacred in our cultural and religious tradition . . . The gift of an eagle feather to wear at a ceremony is a great honor given in recognition of an important transition and has great spiritual meaning. When given in honor of a graduation ceremony, the eagle feather also recognizes academic achievement and school-related success. Eagle feathers are worn with pride and respect.”*

– Isidro Gali, Vice Chairperson of the Pit River Tribe<sup>2</sup>

From time immemorial, many tribal nations have viewed eagles and their feathers as sacred elements of their religious traditions. In many Native cultures, eagle feathers are equal to the cross or the Bible in western religions. Eagle feathers represent honesty, truth, majesty, strength, courage, wisdom, power and freedom. Native peoples believe that as eagles roam the sky, they have a special connection with and are messengers to God.

**“The principal said I have to make sure that [my eagle feather] is hidden and that nobody can see it and it is out of sight. It makes me feel like I have to hide who I am.”**

– Waverly Wilson  
(Fort Belknap Indian Community)<sup>3</sup>

## Ceremonial Significance

*“As a Native American, the eagle feather is a symbol given only for important milestones in one’s life and [is] worn to signify high achievements. I had*

*not only worked tirelessly to ensure that I would graduate with my peers, but I secured an apprenticeship after graduation and received the master Councilor position . . . I wish to wear and display the feather on the tassel on my cap during graduation as a symbol of my hard work, and to convey my [t]ribe’s recognition of my academic achievements and the deep appreciation I have for my Native American cultural and spiritual traditions.”*

– Christian Titman (Pit River Tribe)<sup>5</sup>

Eagle feathers are given only in times of great honor. Many tribes present their young people with eagle feathers upon graduation from high school to signify the achievement of this important educational journey and the honor the graduate brings to his or her family, community, and tribal nation. For many Native students, receiving an eagle feather in recognition of graduation is as significant as earning the diploma or akin to an honor society stole. When a person is given an eagle feather for a certain occasion, it is often seen as a sign of disrespect or dishonor to not wear the feather for that occasion

## Federal Law Recognizes the Sacredness of Eagle Feathers to Tribal Nations

*“Eagle feathers hold a sacred place in Native American culture and religious practices. Because of the feathers’ significance to Native American heritage and consistent with due respect for the government-to-government relationship between the Federal and Native American tribal governments,*